

Important Books

Warrior: An Autobiography, by ARIEL SHARON,
WITH DAVID CHANOFF
(Simon & Schuster, 1989. 571 pages)

This book, not new, is worth our attention because it remains the fullest exposition of the life, the thinking, the methods, and the politics of the current prime minister of Israel. An autobiography obviously presents only one perspective, but Sharon is an open man. The book hides nothing because Sharon feels he has nothing to hide. He deals with all of his controversies. Mostly, he provides the critical insights into his *modus operandi* that anyone concerned about Israel should be familiar with. This is a powerful book. It reads like a thriller. It is steeped in history. It has everything: gripping personal revelation, fascinating military strategy, deft portraits of world leaders, and eerie prophecies. Were they really written in 1989? They could just as well have been written after the outbreak of Palestinian violence on Sept. 27, 2000.

Findings from the book:

- Sharon's life is riddled with personal tragedy. One cannot read these chapters and ever think of *erev Rosh Hashana* the same way again.
- Sharon is obsessed with terrain. After the 1956 campaign in the Sinai Peninsula, Sharon predicted that the US would pressure Israel to withdraw from the Sinai. He also worried that Israel might need to fight there again, and so he personally traipsed up and down the Sinai immediately at the end of the fighting. He made maps. In May 1967, when Nasser threatened war, Sharon, who was by then the Israel Defense Forces southern-front commander, took out his old maps and knew just how he would plan his battles. He knew the enemy's positions and potential lines of attack and retreat.
- Sharon is methodical. He does not improvise. In 1973, when he crossed the Suez Canal, turning the tide of the Yom Kippur War, his actions were the result of years of study of the canal's topography. In 1967, after the Six Day War, Sharon personally walked the length and breadth of Judea and Samaria three times. When later he was in a position to build settlements there, he knew precisely on which areas a settlement would best serve as a security screen against an attack on pre-1967 Israel. In 1971, when he set out to eliminate terrorism from the

Gaza (an achievement that long outlasted his compulsory retirement from active military service one year later), he walked every street, viewed every house, and crossed every orange grove. The ideas he eventually devised were original. Sharon thinks “out of the box,” and he thinks long-range.

- Sharon harmonizes many qualities. He is not personally observant, yet has a deep respect for Jewish tradition. He is steeped in battle, war, blood, and strategy, yet does not regard Arabs as eternally implacable enemies. He employs Arabs on his farm, earns their trust, speaks Arabic, respects Arabs as fighters, and sees no long-range alternative to Israelis and Palestinian Arabs living together. He established Israel’s settlement policy, yet the phrase “Greater Israel” does not appear in his book. Settlements are for security, not ideology. In Sharon, pragmatic hardness and a personal history seared by death and loss combine with a steady optimism. *Warrior* is a penetrating presentation of 61 years of Sharon’s life.

Rememberings: The World of a Russian Jewish Woman in the Nineteenth Century, by PAULINE WENGEROFF.

Translated by HENNY WENKART, edited with an afterword by BERNARD DOV COOPERMAN

(University Press of Maryland, 2000. 306 pages)

In the Jewish context, “Eastern Europe” is both a location and a metonymy. It summons an image of piety and a style of life whose precise contours recede the further we come from the Holocaust. Besides the passage of time, the natural tendency to remember selectively and the ideological tendency to reshape deliberately further cloud the contours of East European Jewish life. There is no doubt that a powerful kernel of spiritual integrity, which only the Yiddish language can fully capture, continues to emanate from the lost world. At the same time, this world was breaking down long before the Holocaust, and was far more complex than either memory or ideology allows. A rare key to pre-Holocaust Ashkenazi Jewish society is a memoir dating from the time. Although as a genre memoir itself presents its own methodological issues, they pale by comparison to gaps created by time and destruction.

Rememberings is a welcome corrective to distorted images of East European Jewry. The author, Pauline Epstein Wengeroff (1833-1916), struggled with the allure of assimilation and the counter-pull of tradi-

tion. She provides intimate details of people and places that, by now, have become stylized. Hers is only one view, but in its directness, unmediated by subsequent history, it is a breath of fresh air.

*Exploring Jewish Tradition: A Transliterated Guide to
Everyday Practice and Observance,*

by ABRAHAM B. WITTY and RACHEL J. WITTY

(Doubleday, 2001. 540 pages)

Publishers are rightly skeptical of introductory books on Judaism. After all, how many different ways can the same thing be said? Who's interested in still another way? Are there not already countless introductory books on Judaism? Search the lists of both "Jewish" and "trade" publishers and there you have it: guidebooks to Jewish thought,

Jewish practice, Jewish history; with and without Hebrew, with and without humor, with and without illustrations. Doubleday had a right to be skeptical when the manuscript of the Wittys crossed its desk. It also had every reason to overcome skepticism. This book is beautifully conceived, beautifully written, beautifully organized, and beautifully laid out. It manages felicitously to combine the basic and the details, the principles and the practices, the history and the literature, the foods and the songs, the feeling tone and the faith, the wit and the solemnity, of Judaism. The proof is in the pudding, so I asked a non-observant friend whether he'd like to look at this book. He grabbed it. I don't expect it back.

*The Tzedakah Treasury: An Anthology of Torah Teachings on
the Mitzvah of Charity—To Instruct and Inspire,*

by AVROHOM CHAIM FEUER, edited by MENACHEM DAVIS

(Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 2000. 451 pages)

Some 50 years ago when rabbinic authority in the American Orthodox community was widely unacknowledged, even within nominally Orthodox congregations, an old saw on resolving the knottiest halakhic issues was, "Ask your local Orthodox rabbi." While it is now and always will remain impossible to resolve a halakhic quandary (*pasken a shaileh*) from a book, this book comes close. The clarity and the comprehensive-

ness—the sheer accessibility—of the laws of *tsedaka* in this volume are remarkable. A whole range of contemporary questions are addressed (for example, “tithing tax refunds,” “factoring in scholarships,” “raffles for *tsedaka*”). The book also contains motivational chapters on *tsedaka*. They are well articulated; a few are especially well done, describing difficult dilemmas that a person may face in deciding how to allot *tsedaka* and in evaluating his decisions. By themselves, however, these chapters would lack power without the accompanying halakhot.

Hiding Places: A Father and His Sons Retrace Their Family’s Escape from the Holocaust, by DANIEL ASA ROSE
(Simon & Schuster, 2000. 380 pages)

I once told a friend, “Not only did I like your book, I read it.” At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a Scottish editor said that he would never read a book before reviewing it. To do so would inevitably prejudice his opinion! I now find myself in an analogous position regarding *Hiding Places*. I have only begun the book, yet recommend it—passionately. Its intent is this: Rose takes his two young sons to Europe to retrace his mother’s escape during the Holocaust. Rose has just been divorced and his trip has two purposes: to recover from the divorce by solidifying his relationship with his sons; and to discover his Jewish identity. The book’s structure is this: Alternating narratives about his own youth in a very upscale Connecticut town, and the journey to Europe. I do not know where the book will end or what its message ultimately will be. The book dazzles in this sense: The writing is shimmering. Brilliant. Utterly able to capture people. His description, for example, of his two great uncles’ European Jewish character is the best I’ve ever read in the genre. Words cannot describe these words. At a minimum, this book is an aesthetic feast.